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“The principle”

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"The Principle"

AN ADDRESS ON

RESPONSIBILITY AND AUTHORITY

BY

GEO. L. DILLMAN, M. Am. Soc. C. E.

BEFORE THE
MEMBERS OF THE S. F. ASSOCIATION OF THE
AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CIVIL ENGINEERS
AUGUST 15, 1916

WITH AN AFTERWORD, APRIL 1917

NOT COPYRIGHTED HELP YOURSELF

"The Principle"

AN ADDRESS ON RESPONSIBILITY AND AUTHORITY

By GEO. L. DILLMAN, M. Am. Soc. C. E.

Mark Twain once wrote a little skit—

"Punch, brother, punch with care,
Punch in the presence of the Passengair,
A buff trip slip for a three cent fare,
A pink trip slip for a five-cent fare;
Punch, brother, punch with care,
Always in the presence of the Passengair."

Most of you have read it, but for those who haven't, the story goes that it was told him by a friend, the jingle caught his fancy, finally obsessing him. It stayed with him by day. It woke him at night. He found himself humming it, singing it. He read it between the lines in his morning paper. It interfered with his business. It got into his writings. It had to be gotten rid of or he would go "bughouse." Finally, he selected out of his acquaintances one to whom he felt a grudge, whispered it into his ear, was relieved of the mental strain of its possession. The recipient, I believe, went crazy.

This talk is analogous, and this is the genesis of the matter.

When I was a young man, I had charge of a division of railroad construction. I had trouble with a bridge contractor. It doesn't make any difference which of us was right. There was some extra work which was necessary. His position was that it was due to my mistake and should be paid for. My position was that it was due to carelessness in framing and that he must rectify it at his own expense. He appealed to my superior, who looked into the matter, told me that I had a great deal of other work on my hands and that he would send a man down to take charge of the bridging.

The next day the man came with the usual letter. The last paragraph, however, said that I was not to be relieved of any responsibility for the bridges. I slept over the letter, got up the next morning, put the new man to work as one of my crew. He had complete charge of the bridging, **but under my direction.** This wasn't what the Resident Engineer had intended, not what the Bridge Engineer understood, but was what I interpreted the letter to mean. The viewpoint affects the reason.

Of course, the matter was passed up to the Resident, who again came down, hot-foot, to settle the thing. My reply to his question

was to call his attention to the last paragraph of his own letter, and I added: "You can't saddle me with responsibility without authority to execute it. If you want to take from me all authority, you must relieve me of all responsibility."

I was young, impressionable and ambitious. The jingle took hold of me, not aggressively and suddenly, but subtly and slowly. At first, it was only a rule to be applied in certain cases. Then when I had charge of more considerable work with subordinates, I had to be consistent. They were to be saddled with responsibility only when they were given authority to execute it.

Then its application became more extensive. It applied to actions of a much wider range. It became a principle. As a principle, it had a still wider zone of application, until it became a basic principle with few exceptions. For the last few years, it has become in my mind, the greatest ethical principle. I have only recently formulated it.

I have wondered sometimes if I were "nutty" and the principle a dream. But I have mentioned it to some of you sane ones, who have approved it, and now I am going to pass it along to the profession. The "Punch, brother, punch with care" is in this case, "Authority and Responsibility should lie together." You are the people to whom I owe a grudge, so here goes.

I don't want to pass this along on my say-so. No learning is of value in that way. Two and two may make four at first, because we are told so. But two and two do not really make four to any scholar until he knows it independently of such instruction. So with this Principle. Until it is yours by conviction, it is worthless. When it is yours by conviction, it will be put in daily practice with very satisfactory results.

"Authority and Responsibility should lie together." To the extent they do, success and advance ensue. There has been no advance since the dawn of history that has not been preceded by their unification.

Authority is the word used, but by it is meant more than the mere right to do something. It also includes the power, the strength, the know-how to do it. A mere permit to do something without the means is nothing. The means without the right is nothing. So authority includes all the correlative means with the right to use them.

Responsibility is a burden to be carried, a load to be shouldered. It may be natural or acquired, public or private. No matter its nature, it is always something to be borne.

The desire for authority is natural. It is natural to take leadership, if we can find someone to follow. The reverse is true of responsibility. We naturally do not want it. It is something we instinctively avoid.

"Authority and Responsibility should lie together." To the extent they are separated, trouble ensues. There is no trouble, political, social, business, professional, personal or collective, that cannot be traced, upon proper analysis, to their separation.

Sometimes the separation is the result of law. The effect is the same. We are constantly changing our laws because their operation is unsatisfactory. We allow interested parties to get laws passed which place authority where there is no responsibility and take authority away from where responsibility should lie. They are all wrong, and, therefore, constantly changing. If the Principle were followed, we would have fewer laws and no changes. If the Principle were a little understood, the changes would be fewer.

So much for the Principle. It is simplicity itself. But some of its applications are exceedingly complex. The purpose of education is to enable the individual to analyze complex cases in order to apply the Principle. "To do or not to do," is an every-day question. Analysis of conditions in the light of "The Principle" will settle each case and settle it right. There are complications, but all complications arise from violations of the Principle.

"Authority and Responsibility should lie together." It follows that "butting in" or wielding authority where there is no responsibility is an error. Another error is shirking responsibility where it naturally lies. In the last analysis, these are the only two crimes. Think it over. Theft, lying, murder, rape, all are violations of the Principle. There is no recognized crime that is not a direct violation of it.

This is all a big thing. But all principles are big things. That's what principle means. Its application is co-extensive with human activity and further. It invades the physical world. The effect of trussing or posting an arch, the attempt to make a dam tight in more than one place, are examples of a violation of the Principle.

Consider the Family. When the parents are in accord, each recognizing their own and the others' responsibility, and granting full authority for its execution, the happiest family is the result. But we are not yet far enough from barbarism to avoid the desire to be boss; so as a general rule, one or the other parent is the stronger character and dominates. If the dominant one, wielding authority, also shoulders responsibility and the other concedes the case, the result is still a very happy combination. But when authority is disputed, responsibility shirked, the result is discord.

Consider a business organization. There is always a nominal head. If this is also an actual head, not interfered with, possessing the means (knowledge, judgment, funds, initiative, or, in other words, full authority), the result is success. But every failure and every partial failure can be traced to somebody's "butting in" or shirking. Oftentimes the two crimes are committed in one act. The principals "butt in" and interfere with the management; the management "butts in" and interferes with the details of subordinate heads, thereby refusing to accord authority where they are placing

responsibility; the departments clash with each other, and a thousand and one things are done wrong. On proper analysis, every one of the troubles, partial failures and complete failures, can be traced directly to a violation of the Principle.

Take politics generally. When the elected one comes to office with no strings on him and is not hampered in the execution of his responsibility, the result is the best possible. But generally by pre-election promises, party or personal fealty, the office-holder has obtained only the responsibility of office, having ceded the authority for the sake of election. Then the Civil Service Board compels him to work with tools of their (not his) selection. The result is always less than good. He fails, partly or wholly, as a result of conditions. If he had understood the Principle, he would not have accepted office under the conditions. The recall is for him, or political oblivion, or both.

We have a wonderful example of violation, partial accord and full accord with the Principle in the Panama Canal. First, Wallace tried to shoulder the responsibility under a Commission whose headquarters were in Washington. He was not even a member of the Commission to start with. Complete separation of authority and responsibility. Wallace started but didn't get far.

Then Stevens took up the same load of responsibility. He was a member of the Commission; had much more authority than Wallace, but the new Commission had its headquarters and President in the United States. Same responsibility that Wallace had,, more authority. Stevens made some advance. Then came a set of conditions under which Stevens felt that his authority was not commensurate with his responsibility, so he severed his connection with the work, but not before he had nearly everything in good working shape. So much was this the case that Colonel Goethals said once, when patted on the back, "I was preceded by a man who understood transportation. My progress is somewhat due to Stevens' plan for the removal and disposal of the material of Culebra cut."

Then the responsibility was taken up by Goethals, with full authority. He was not only President of the Commission, but the rest of the Commission were largely his subordinates. The result was the greatest and most successful construction organization in the history of the human race.

Wallace and Stevens were sacrificed to the education of the authorities at Washington. They failed not because of lack of ability, but because of lack of authority. Goethals or any one else would have failed from the same cause. The greatness of Goethals over that of his predecessors was his application of the Principle. He insisted on having the authority before he attempted to shoulder the responsibility.

There is nothing new about this Principle, unless it is this formulation of it. It has, like other principles, always existed. It had always been in evidence, either from accord and success or from violation and trouble. There is no better measure of greatness of all characters of history than their application of it, their ability to shoulder responsibility, and in executing it, to wield authority.

No doubt, this formulation will be denied, criticized and ridiculed. If it will not stand all these and every test which can be applied, it is no principle at all. But, in the ethical world it is as universal as gravity in the physical. When Newton first formulated the principle or law of gravity, it was denied by the savants and anathematized by the Churchmen. He, fortunately, lived to meet all criticisms and today it is the first thing taught in the study of physics in all our schools.

Like the law of gravity, again, the Principle cannot be deduced, but is reached by induction. Any fact, in contradiction, will upset either of them. But any very comprehensive theory (principle or natural law) is reached in the same way. Once established, however, deduction can be made in application to cases.

Endorsement of notes; Surety on Bonds; Lending money without security; Trusts. These and many others of a similar nature are a violation of the Principle. Each is a separation of responsibility and authority.

Capital and Labor; Labor Unions. Men with capital have an authority by reason of its power. If they always handled it with a full appreciation of responsibility therefor, there would be little ground for complaint. But from lack of the feeling of responsibility for its use, there grew to be a feeling that one could do what he pleased with his own, so capital dominated labor until labor felt oppressed. In some cases, it was oppressed. The natural thing was for labor to form unions, which were originally intended only for protection of themselves. But these combinations of labor soon saw that they could to some extent dominate Capital. Being just as greedy for power (authority) as Capital, they exert their authority sometimes with small or no feelings of responsibility. This extends to authority through politics until there is a tendency to release unions from the effects of their acts by law. Witness the exemption of Unions from the operation of the Sherman Law.

Both these are wrong. Capital has no right to dictate to Labor. Labor has no right to dictate to Capital. But either of them if they would shoulder the full responsibility for their acts might be allowed to dominate. They can't get along without each other.

Capital will probably never wield more authority than it has in the recent past. Its domination seems on the toboggan. But Labor will dignify itself and Unionism progress and become permanent when the Unions feel their responsibility and acknowledge it, legally and morally. There is nothing more respectable than Labor, but it belittles itself by shirking its responsibility. It will be ennobled when it proclaims to the world its intent to be responsible for all its

acts. Then and then only will Unionism be permanent, Labor dominant.

The President. I said I would not talk politics, and I won't be partisan. But the President is such a public character that I want to say one word as to the foundation trouble with politics. If there is one thing that the lay mind can understand it is that our Constitution contemplated three branches of Government. Whether that is the best may be a matter of opinion, but that intent is the fact. These were the Legislative, Executive and Judicial.

Now the laws are such that the President by various means, principally through patronage, affected the Legislative branch or Congress. He was "butting in" to the extent of such control. This increased until in the time of Roosevelt, it became fairly complete. The only legislation was that proposed by the President, and so the laws of Congress became the dictates of the President, instead of the expression of Congress. It doesn't make any difference whether the President's name is Roosevelt or Wilson. The principle is wrong. It is a change in form of Government. It should be stopped as it is today the biggest graft in our whole system. Graft of money is insignificant by contrast. In fact, grant of money is for the purpose of gaining power, while this is graft of power itself. It is wielding power without responsibility.

Commissions. The growth and sassiness of Public Utility Corporations became so aggravating that some curb was necessary to protect the public. They were wielding authority without responsibility. The domination of State Legislatures and effect on our National Government was notorious. It was a violation of the Principle. And so Commissions were formed to curb them and protect the people. These Commissions have now grown so powerful that the Corporations are not only effectively curbed, but they are paralyzed in many cases.

The purpose of a Public Service Corporation is to give service. The regulation has extended to operation in a practical way, capitalization, rates and even method of service being dictated by Commissions.

This wrong in amount. The public's right or authority should only extend to the rectification of abuses of authority. By hampering the operation of Utilities, the Corporations were morally relieved of responsibility. They have no pride in their work. Their only interest is reduced to a financial one, always corruptive. And the Commissions in wielding authority do it with no responsibility, either moral or financial, which is a violation of the Principle.

Succinctly, the Corporations violate the Principle. Error No. 1. Then the Public form the Commissions who curb the Corporations, to be sure, but in doing so, in almost every case, exceed their proper authority and sometimes their legal authority, as evidenced by the reversals by Courts. Error No. 2. We so often commit errors in rectifying others.

Slavery, in all its forms, is a violation of the Principle. Chattel slavery has about gone, but there are other forms. We are all apt to be slaves for various reasons, none of them proper. We are slaves to our appetites, to our ambitions, to our laziness, to appearances, to consistency. When not slaves, we are masters, which is just as bad, and sometimes worse.

In the days of bodily slavery, the slave was shorn of authority without intending to relieve him of responsibility. But the law must be obeyed or punishment follow, and so the master really got the responsibility with the authority. The slave, if of small ambition, was really the happier of the two. But when the master felt no responsibility, the slave had to, or suffer.

It is just the same now with other forms of slavery. All employment has in it some element of slavery, unless the Principle be strictly applied. Engineers have all experienced employment where the employer seeks to make or modify the report over the Engineer's signature. This is nothing more or less than a violation of the Principle, authority with employer, responsibility with the Engineer.

Mr. Mellen was President of the N. Y., N. H. & H. in responsibility only. The authority was entirely Morgan's. Result: Hell for the stockholders, employees and the public. And yet it was originally their own fault. Had they elected to authority Directors who would properly shoulder responsibility, Morgan could not have dominated all authority. Had Mr. Mellen possessed any backbone, he would not have been put in such a false position. It seems that generally the Principle was violated all through that fiasco.

The Principle is a wonderful rule of conduct. When the question comes up, "To do or not to do" anything, if it is examined in the light of the Principle, the finding will be absolutely right. If the responsibility is ours, tend to it. If it is not ours, let it alone. Don't "butt in." Don't shirk. And especially don't let any one "butt in" to our business.

I am cutting this off rather short, in hopes of having some little discussion. The subject is so near that I may not have made myself plain, and I want to do so. Having taken up the responsibility of this formulation, I want the chance to make it understood. I don't expect immediate accord, especially from the oldsters. But I hope that some of the Youngsters, who are still receptive, will have caught some part of it, that the seed I am trying to sow will not all be wasted, although I apprehend that most of it has fallen on barren ground.

The application is the important thing. I want to call your attention to these facts. Each one of you has never had any success, or made any advance, except by applying the Principle. And, conversely, you have never had any trouble except through its violation. This statement is made with small knowledge of your business successes or troubles, and yet I warrant the statement correct.

Afterword

APRIL 1917

The preceding address was printed by the San Francisco Association of the American Society of Civil Engineers a few days after delivery. Copies were sent to a few individuals and, up to date, no exceptions have been taken, but commendations have been many. Among the latter, General Goethals says:

> "I have been following that principle for the last thirty-five years, discovering it like yourself early in life, since when I have insisted on putting it into operation in everything I subsequently undertook."

Professor Durand of Stanford University says:

> "It is indeed a corner-stone to an orderly condition of society, and cannot be too strongly emphasized."

These and other commendations excite a desire for its further promulgation.

The Principle, however, is akin to a Law of Nature, in that it is universal in application, has no exceptions and violation of it is always punished. Therefore, it is greater than this or any formulation of it.

As it is the greatest single item of human knowledge; as its violation is the sole cause of trouble in the world; as it is the only yard stick by which men, individually and collectively, can be measured, it is specially offered to teachers.

It requires no consensus of opinion to operate it. The individual who knows it can and will put it into operation. To the extent any one puts it into operation they will be successful in a much broader sense than a merely financial way. It is the one Principle that will "justify one's self to his own soul."

It has been called an ethical principle, but it is also a moral, legal, religious and philosophic principle. All discord with it is either immoral or unmoral. Statutes and adjudications in violation of it are wrong and impermanent. Tenets of any religion in non-comformity are temporary and changeable because of such lack of conformation. As a basis of philosophy, it works.

Casually examined, the Principle seems to have many exceptions. But further examination will prove all such apparent exceptions to be not only not such, but actual confirmations of it.

The Principle has been taught but not particularly emphasized since the dawn of history. It has been followed in practice to a much greater extent than it has been taught. Yet it seems to be largely unknown.

"Every one shall die for his own iniquity. Every man that eateth the sour grape, his teeth shall be set on edge." This was said by the prophet Jeremiah a long time ago. It is only synonymous with saying that responsibility must be shouldered for each act or exercise of authority.

Francis Bacon says: "He that thinks of the greatness of his place more than the duty of his place shall soon commit misprisons." Only another way of putting the Principle.

"Property has its duties as well as its rights." This was said first apparently in the Letters of Thomas Drummond. It was afterward said by Disraeli. A very pat way of stating one application of the Principle.

Lincoln wrote to the American Ambassador at London: "If the British Government in any way approach you directly or indirectly with propositions which assume or contemplate an appeal to the President on the subject of our internal affairs, whether it seem to imply a purpose to dictate or to mediate or to advise, or even to solicit or persuade, you will answer that you are forbidden to debate, to hear or in any way to receive, entertain or transmit any communication of the kind." This is an application of the Principle. This and many other sayings of Lincoln prove that he understood and practiced the Principle, whether he ever formulated it or not.

Lincoln in 1859 said in New York: "Let us have faith that right makes might; and in that faith dare to do our duty as we understand it."

Daniel Webster said: "A sense of duty pursues us ever. It is omnipresent like the Deity. If we take to ourselves the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, duty performed or duty violated is still with us, for our happiness or our misery." How beautifully this expresses the Principle. Duty performed is Responsibility shouldered. Duty violated is Responsibility shirked.

Tennyson says in his Ode on the death of Wellington: "The path of duty was the way to glory." And so it is. Never any greatness but by sh uldering responsibility, following the "path of duty."

John Armstrong wrote: "Of right and wrong he taught truths as refined as ever Athens heard; and, strange to tell, he practiced what he preached.'

"Practice is more important than precept."

Tennyson says in Fatima: "Because right is right, to follow right were wisdom in the scorn of consequence."

Crabbe says in The Squire and the Priest: "But 'twas a maxim he had often tried, that right was right and there would he abide."

Sir William Jones says: "Men who their duties know but know their right; and knowing, dare maintain."

Elbert Hubbard said in 1913: "To act in absolute freedom and at the same time realize that responsibility is the price of freedom, is salvation."

Theo. N. Vail said in 1915, in a report to his stockholders: "A corporation, no more than an individual, can be bound hand and foot and yet be active and give good service." Equivalent to saying that taking away authority relieves from responsibility.

Senator John W. Weeks said in a speech in San Francisco April 23, 1915: "There is a tendency on the part of bureau officers to reach out for more power, even if they do not assume authority which the law does not give them." Here it is, butting in and wielding authority where there is and can be no corresponding responsibility.

"Mind your own business," and "Don't butt in," are expressions of the Principle. As one reads history, speeches and writings, the Principle is much in evidence either from accord or violation. It has always been known, but the extent of its application seems not to have been sufficiently emphasized, sometimes not understood, by teachers.

Readers are invited to express opinions hereon. The author sees no more important work in life than in advertising "The Principle." He will welcome commendation. He will try and resolve honest doubt. He will reply to dissent and confute it.

GEO. L. DILLMAN,

14 Montgomery Street, San Francisco.

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